

142
291



ABOVE, *One of the workers at a combire.*
BELOW, *A Haitian cornfield.*

● 243



[facing p. 73]

62 Services for the Loa

243
243
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269
[1252] In the Artibonite Valley, where much rice is grown, a similar ceremony takes place before the rice is gathered from the fields. In this ceremony it is rice that is shared with the family ancestors, who have first rights, and with close friends who have aided with the planting. This feast is called *mangé diri*, or sometimes *gouté diri*, the tasting of the rice. Small amounts of rice are taken from the fields, cooked with red beans or Congo beans, or perhaps made into dumplings. The farmer's friends and relatives gather [524] while the food is still cooking, and play games such as *wari* and *trois-sept*. [538] The children play *gag* games and sing songs, and sometimes a *malt' conte*—a storyteller—comes to entertain them.

When the food is finally ready, the family ancestors are given their share. The farmer takes a calabash bowl of the rice and walks around the house grounds calling upon his immediate ancestors to accept their share. He drops a little food on the ground for the remembered dead, for the unknown dead who preceded them, for the Haitian dead, and for the dead of Africa. He also drops small portions for the dead twins, the dead albinos, the deformed dead, and the dead who have lost limbs, and for the distressed dead who have been improperly buried, or who may not have received the feasts that were due them. Afterward, he offers food to those who died of drowning, or who were lost at sea and never heard of again.

Each course is shared with the ancestors. The farmer takes a pitcher of water, spilling a little here and a little there until the dead have quenched their thirst. He also gives a little of everything to the family loa. Then the calabashes are set out on a bench or table reserved for the dead, and this food is not disturbed. Food for the marassas is set out separately on the ground in three small *conit*, or gourd dishes.

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524 The family ancestors whose good will has made the harvest possible having been taken care of, the food is now shared among the extended family and the friends who helped in the fields. Later there are prayers to the loa, the saints, and God, led by the houngan or a *prêt' savane*. To finish the affair, there may be Juba-type dances for the older people, while the children watch or play *gag* games.

Only after this service are the farmer and his family and his *coumbite* (mutual labor group), if he belongs to one, free to go out and harvest the rice.

243
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171 These feasts of the rice and yam harvests are not of New World origin. Similar harvest festivals for yams or rice are held over a wide area of West Africa. There, as in Haiti, the fundamental concern is with the family ancestors, whose good will must be constantly nourished so that the rains continue to fall, the crops flourish, and human beings remain fertile. Among the Ashanti of Ghana, for example, the yam and rice harvests are

* [Account given by Jean Ravel Pinto. Cf. P. 351, Category 116.-- Analyst]

Services for the Loa 63

celebrated with elaborate rituals for the dead. As in Haiti, great importance is laid on the presence of all living descendants, whose numbers are calculated to influence the ancestors' behavior. And as in Haiti, the first yams and the first rice are offered to the dead, and only after the family ritual does the family divide the crop.⁵

243
244
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SERVICE FOR THE ASSOTOR DRUM

The *assotor* drum is the largest and most sacred of all Haitian drums. Around it is built an impressive and elaborate service known as the *mangé assotor*, which, according to local traditions and circumstances, may be held as often as every three years or as infrequently as every twenty-one years. The period between *mangés* always consists of an odd number of years. A houngan from Jérémie declared the service might properly be held every three, five, or seven years. Another cult priest in the Cul-de-Sac Plain said it could be held every seven, seventeen, or twenty-one years. The *assotor* is known as the *plus grand mouné* (the most venerable "man") of the hounfor. However, few cult centers possess an *assotor*. "*Assotor c'est fort bagaille, c'est pas zaffai tout mouné*" (The *assotor* is powerful, it isn't everybody's affair), Haitians say. This is what a man from Jérémie tells about it:

534
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798

"The *assotor* is the greatest of all things in the hounfor. The Rada drums are only for the Dahomey nation. The Congo drums are for the Congo nation. The *assotor* is a man of Dahomey, but he is for all nations. It is for all loa—Péto, Congo, Bumba, Dahomey. The *assotor* belongs to Dahomey, but when there is a great service the *assotor* is the host to the loa of every rite, the loa of Haiti and of Africa. When the *assotor* is played, the loa are awakened everywhere. Loa who have been forgotten by the Creoles (Haitians) will come to the service and mount people, and when the loa have gone, many people don't know what loa has been riding them. Some ancient spirits from far away come only to the *assotor* service, and when it is over they aren't heard of again.

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184
282
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"The *assotor* drum is not for small things, it is for great occasions. For some people there are no occasions in their whole lives great enough for an *assotor* service. When all other things have failed, it is only then that the *assotor* is called upon.

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"If a big houngan should have an *assotor* drum, he can have only one, and it is the chief of the hounfor. All other drums are its servants. You can make an *assotor*, but it is not necessarily an *assotor*. It may look like an *assotor* and not be an *assotor*. To be an *assotor* it must not only have the shape of an *assotor* but it must be accepted by the loa. There was a houngan near Jérémie who made an *assotor* and held a great service with it.

⁵ [Informant: Albert Kofi Prempeh, Ghana. Cf. p. 351, category 116. — Analysis]

[115]

[P. 112-6]

142
302
534
202
476



9. *Calling the coumbite: signaling on a conch-shell trumpet.*

243
291
476
516



10. *A women's coumbite weeding a cornfield near the town of Plaisance.*

142
 291
 302
 322
 412
 516



16. Man with a machete making a wari board. The machete is used for cutting trees, trimming brush, weeding gardens, fashioning wooden objects such as drums and mortars, and many other purposes.

243
 252
 291
 415



17. Winnowing grain with a wari
 tray.